[GUIDE TO THE NN23 SEA ISLANDERS FILE]

[The NN23 Sea Islanders file was selected for inclusion in the Human Relations Area Files as a representative of one of the few Black North American ethnic groups in the system. The file includes much of the socio-cultural literature on the Georgia and South Carolina Sea Islanders, with perhaps some emphasis on the inhabitants of the islands of St. Helena, Johns, and Wadmalaw.

Ethnonyms Gullah-Speaking African Americans

Orientation

Identification. The term "Sea Islanders" refers to the African American inhabitants of the coastal islands of the southeastern United States. The population is characterized by a distinctive Creole language, Gullah or Geechee, and by a long history of land ownership and autonomy from mainland authorities. The region is often cited as a repository of African cultural "survivals" among New World peoples of African descent.

Location. The Sea Islands are a series of over 1,000 transgressive barrier islands extending from South Carolina to the northern border of Florida. Although most are small and uninhabited, the largest and most densely populated (including John's, St. Helena, Port Royal, and Hilton Head) lie between the cities of Charleston, South Carolina and Savannah, Georgia. The major islands are today connected to the mainland by bridges and, on many, the African American population has been displaced by White-owned resort and residential developments. The islands are topographically flat, climatically semi-tropical, and subject to periodic flooding during hurricanes and other storms. The maze of rivers, estuaries, and tidal marshes separating the islands from the mainland provide a rich wetlands environment for a variety of plant and animal species, some of them endangered.

Demography. The population of the islands has varied considerably through the years, along with economic cycles of prosperity and hardship. The region has, since the beginning of the eighteenth century, been characterized by an African American majority on the islands and in some coastal mainland communities. African slaves were being imported into the area as early as 1682 and the trade reached a peak of over 11,000 by 1773. This high rate of importation, coupled with a tendency toward large, concentrated land holdings, resulted in a greatly unbalanced population. According to Rose, by 1861 almost 83 percent of the coastal population consisted of slaves. Entire islands and their populations belonged to single landowners and worked under the supervision of one or two White overseers. After the Civil War, much of the former plantation land passed into the hands of the freedmen in the form of small parcels (see below). Sea Islanders participated in the general trend of African American migration from rural to urban areas which characterized the early years of

this century. St. Helena Island, for example, saw a population decline of approximately 45 percent between 1900 and 1930. Jones-Jackson reports that African Americans constituted more than 50 percent of Charleston County in 1930 but only 31.4 percent in 1970. Since resort development accelerated in the 1960s and 1970s, the White population has been growing rapidly. Hilton Head Island, which was almost entirely inhabited by African Americans in 1950, has undergone a particularly dramatic shift, with Whites now holding an eight to one majority.

Linguistic Affiliation. The distinctive Creole language spoken by Sea Islanders has long attracted researchers. The terms "Gullah" or "Geechee" are conventionally used to refer to this language (although not to Sea Islanders themselves, by whom they are taken as terms of abuse). Linguists believe that Gullah is the only surviving form of a generalized Plantation Creole which at one time was widespread in the southern United States. This Creole undoubtedly originated as a pidgin, or trade language, from the practical necessity for communication between Africans and Europeans engaged in the West African coastal economy. Gullah is a true Creole in that it differs from other African American dialects of English, which do not vary from the standard in phonology, vocabulary, or syntax, and are thus intelligible to speakers of the standard dialect. Creole languages, on the other hand, may be similar to the "primary" language in vocabulary but differ significantly in grammar and syntax; while the Gullah lexicon is composed of mostly English words, its grammatical rules are demonstrably closer to West African languages such as Ewe, Mandinka, Igbo, Twi, and Yoruba. It is on the basis of these grammatical features and on the lack of intelligibility to English-speakers that Gullah is considered a language in its own right and not a regional dialect of English. Sea Islanders, however, speak a variety of English dialects as well as using Gullah as the first language at home. Choice of language used varies with social context, with "true" or "deep" Gullah reserved for the primary community. Sea Islanders use various dialects of Black American English in their economic or bureaucratic dealings with non-Islanders. It is important to note that there is considerable ambivalence attached to the use of Gullah in public contexts at which outsiders are present. The use of the language is negatively sanctioned by mainlanders, both African American and White, as denoting backwardness, poverty, and rural lack of sophistication. To be called a "Gullah" or "Geech" is to be insulted, inferring that one can neither "talk right" nor understand what others say. With the recent increase in White tourism has come increasing curiosity about the language, and tourists often express surprise that Sea Islanders can "speak English." Islanders frequently find that visitors speak slowly, loudly, and deliberately to them, as if they were deaf or mentally incompetent, and they quite rightly resent such treatment. Yet, Gullah remains the primary language associated with home, family,

and an independent life-style, in spite of the obvious impact of mass media, schools, and out-migration. Children are still taught Gullah as a first language and Jones-Jackson speculates that, for the near future at least, "some version of Gullah will probably continue to exist."

History and Cultural Relations

The strategic location of the Sea Islands is reflected in the history of conflict in the region. Port Royal Sound is the deepest and most accessible harbor on the east coast south of Chesapeake Bay; consequently, Spanish, French, and English colonizers all competed for control of the area. Fierce resistance by the indigenous Yemassee peoples made stable European settlement on the southernmost islands impossible until the early eighteenth century. Early British planters came from Barbados, bringing with them a plantation system based on monocrop agriculture and African slavery. The original cash crop, indigo, was replaced by long-staple cotton after the American Revolution. This "Sea Island" cotton produced huge fortunes for the White planters and the region developed a reputation for wealth and luxury. All this came to an end on November 6, 1861, when the Federal fleet, moving north to blockade Charleston, attacked the two small Confederate forts on Hilton Head. The planters evacuated inland, leaving behind their slaves and the year's cotton crop, still in the field. This constellation of events set the stage for the famous "Sea Island Experiment" (or Port Royal Experiment), a federal program to determine whether or not ex-slaves could function as free, small-holding citizens. The experiment, sponsored by the Secretary of the Treasury and administered by a young abolitionist lawyer from Boston, envisioned freed slaves working for wages on government-owned cotton plantations while being prepared for eventual citizenship. Missionaries, teachers, and agricultural specialists were provided by Northern benevolent societies, bringing an influx of young, well-educated, fiercely abolitionist men and women from the North behind the battle lines of the Civil War. As the Reconstruction promise of "40 acres and a mule" was revealed as a myth throughout the rest of the South, Sea Islanders, working with northern advisors, managed to gain legal title to most of the land they had formerly worked as slaves. In the words of Willie Lee Rose, the Sea Island Experiment was indeed a "rehearsal for reconstruction" and one of the few places in the South where African Americans emerged from the war with a secure land base. Although many researchers have stressed the physical isolation of the Sea Islands and imply that their people have been "cut off" since the nineteenth century from mainland U.S. history, this is clearly not the case. In actuality, the islands have never been fully self-sufficient and periodic male labor migration has been an important source of income since boll weevil infestations at the turn of the century destroyed small-holder cotton production. Sea Islanders have historically produced and sold agricultural products in the markets of cities like Savannah and

Charleston, and the men have worked as commercial fishermen and longshoremen up and down the eastern seaboard for generations. What is unique to the island communities is not their geographic isolation but their economic and cultural autonomy. The ownership of land appears to be the crucial variable in Sea Islanders' ability to choose what off-island work they will accept and for how long. Many of the islands instituted their own legal and criminal codes, administered through the churches, allowing them to by-pass the White-controlled "unjust law" of the mainland. Since the 1950s, much of the traditional land-base has been eroded by out-migration, rising property taxes, forced sheriff's sales, and other coercive practices employed by White developers. As a result, the remaining African American population is increasingly dependent upon wages earned in the service sector of the seasonal tourist economy.

Settlements

Settlement on the islands follows a dispersed pattern with few nucleated centers or villages. On some islands, notably St. Helena, the boundaries of former plantations remain important community markers and define local identity in significant ways. Adult sons strive to acquire land adjacent to their parents on which to build a house and raise their own families; this practice results, over time, in kin-based clusters or compounds of dwellings around a parental "yard." Guthrie has argued that households as social units (as opposed to physical structures) are defined by the presence of a stove and a woman to cook on it; families are defined as those who "eat from the same pot," regardless of where they physically reside. Mobil homes now provide a low cost alternative to new home construction, although many of the older dwellings conform to the model of the "shotgun house," indigenous to the American South. As waterfront property was the first to rise in value (with concomitant increases in yearly taxes), most remaining African American-owned land is located in the interior, less desirable, portions of the islands.

Economy

Subsistence and Commercial Activities. After the Civil War and prior to the erosion of the land-base, the islands supported a mixed economy of small farmers and fishermen who produced both for subsistence and for the urban markets of Savannah and Charleston. Infusions of cash were provided by the seasonal employment of men in off-island occupations such as commercial fishing, logging, and dock work. Outside employment was necessary for paying the all-important property taxes on land and for buying the staple foods of rice and grits which were not produced on the islands. Fish, shellfish, game, garden vegetables, and domestic animals produced on the islands provided the rest of the diet. Industrial pollutants have seriously reduced marine resources (particularly the oyster and shrimp populations) and have placed severe limits on the ability of small, independent fishermen to meet subsistence needs. The identification of island men as "fishermen" or

"rivermen," however, remains ideologically important. Full-time employment in the service economy, especially in the resort industry, has now become the major source of income.

Industrial Arts. A number of distinctive island crafts have recently become items of interest to tourists. The well-known coiled baskets, made of local materials like pine needles and sweet grass, are an especially popular art form for both domestic use and for sale. Some communities have become specialized in the production of distinctive foods and as destinations for urban excursion boats.

Kinship, Marriage, and Sociopolitical Organization

Marriage and Domestic Unit. Kinship among Sea Islanders generally follows American cognatic descent. A married couple constitutes the basic unit of the household, which may also contain their direct descendants, together or separately, adopted and foster children, and their co-resident partners. Formalized marriages are preferred and can be documented as far back as the census of 1880, in clear contradiction of the popular notion of African American families as "destroyed" by slavery. Children are considered members of their parents' households until marriage, at which time residence is ideally virilocal. Newly married sons bring their brides into their parents' household until a new dwelling can be provided, preferably in the "yard" or nearby. Additional household members are added through informal adoption and fosterage and by the tendency of young adults working in mainland cities to send their small children to be raised by grandparents in relative rural safety. Households headed by single women typically represent the end of domestic group cycles and consist of widows alone or with grandchildren.

Inheritance. Inheritance descends to all children of a married pair equally, although "outside" children whose parents have not married inherit only from their mothers. The increasing number of off-island heirs who hold rights in small parcels of island property has contributed to the acquisition of formerly African American-owned land by White developers.

Social and Political Organization. On St. Helena Island, former plantations serve as important socio-political units. Island citizenship is determined through membership in a particular plantation, acquired not by birth or filiation but through "catching sense" in a specific community. Guthrie defines catching sense as a process by which children between the ages of 2 and 10 begin to "understand and remember the meaning of social relationships." Having "caught sense" on a particular plantation confers eligibility for participation in the system of dispute management and litigation which operates through the Baptist Churches and their affiliated "praise houses." The church hierarchy, consisting of the ministers, deacons, and local praise house leaders and their committees, also functions as the politico-jural structure. Disputes between islanders can go through a series of levels within the religious court system; the

goal is to achieve confession and reconciliation between the parties rather than punishment. Islanders who insist on taking cases before the secular courts or "unjust law" of the mainland authorities are sanctioned informally through gossip and general disapproval and may even lose membership in their congregation. Beyond the religious court system, social control is exercised primarily through informal means, such as respect for elders, beliefs in the ability of recently deceased relatives to punish social transgressions, and mechanisms of gossip, reputation, and respect characteristic of small, fact-to-face communities.

Religion and Expressive Culture

Religious Beliefs. Most Sea Islanders are at least nominal members of the Baptist or Methodist Churches, although many of the smaller island congregations can no longer sustain a full-time minister. The praise house system, as described above for St. Helena, was once widespread on the islands and allowed for immediate, local-level participation in weekday praise meetings which supplemented Sunday services. Praise houses in former times were the settings for "ring shouts," a form of religiously inspired dance. With the decline in the African American population, most praise houses and many churches have fallen into disrepair.

Medicine. Local medical practitioners, primarily women who were also skilled as midwives or "grannies," are also rapidly disappearing in the face of restrictive state regulations. The grannies are remembered with great affection and respect for their ability to "put you on your feet out of the woods" through the use of locally available herbal medicines. The general feeling is that White-run hospitals and doctors use the same "plants" in their pills as were known to the grannies, but charge much more for their services. The ability to cause others harm through illness as well as the ability to heal is likewise held to be available to skilled and knowledgeable people.

Death and Afterlife. Concepts of death and the afterlife depart from standard Christian doctoring in the belief in multiple souls. While the "soul" leaves the body and returns to God at death, the "spirit" remains on earth, connected to and still interested in its living descendants. Graves are decorated with favorite objects belonging to the deceased in life and elaborate funerals are planned and saved for by the living. Many of the practices relating to the treatment of dead bodies, graves, and burial grounds have clear West African origins. The historical continuity of practices still observable today has been documented by Creel.

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Source Evaluation

The NN23 Sea Islanders file consists of 11 sources, all in English, dealing with a variety of ethnographic topics. There is no single study in this file that covers all aspects of the ethnography of the Sea Islanders, but a combination of sources 1-4 should provide the reader with a fairly good overview of what these people are like. The first source in the file, 1: Federal Writers' Project, is a pioneering study demonstrating the continuing influence of African folklore among Georgian coastal Blacks as it existed in the late 1930s. The material in this study was gathered by members of the Federal Writers' Project from interviews with sharecroppers and ex-slaves and from other available records (e. g., court records, cemetery inventories, etc.). Although much of the material collected deals with religious practices, such as conjuring (sorcery), death customs, belief in spirits, magic and curing, and baptism, there is also a considerable amount of data here on naming practices, music and musical instruments, dance, and the Sea Islanders' knowledge and beliefs about their African ancestors. 2: Jones-Jackson is an important contribution to linguistics and folklore, and is one of the first book length treatments of contemporary Sea Islanders' language and culture. This source provides a general survey of the area and its people, concentrating on geography, demography, and economics and social history. A major portion of this work is devoted to a study of Sea Islanders' folklore, and story-telling

techniques with a few biographical sketches of some of the prominent storytellers of the area. 3: Creel is basically an historical account of slavery in the South with particular reference to South Carolina, Georgia, and the coastal Sea Islands. Primary emphasis in this work is on the relationship between the community, religion, and resistance to slavery in the early historical period. Creel also provides much additional information on missionary activities, slave-master relations, and the Black religious experience. 4: Carawan & Carawan, dealing with the inhabitants of Johns Island, South Carolina, is a study largely based on memory ethnography -- the community's recollection of its history back to the turn of the 20th century (from ca. 1988). The source contains information on the early days of sharecropping and subsistence activities on the island, as well as on folk medical practices, house types, the religious experiences of the people in the "shouts", the thoughts and feelings of the islanders in experiencing the civil rights movement for the first time, the development of citizenship schools on the island, and the enormous changes that have taken place since the 1960s. The music and songs of the Sea Islanders have long been of much interest to musicologists and ethnologists alike. Quite a bit of detailed information on music, musical instruments, songs, and song texts will be found in: 1: Federal Writers' Project; 8: Smith; 9: Parrish; and 10: Johnson. The language spoken by the Sea Islanders is known as Gullah (or Geechee). It is basically a Creole language combining elements from English with various other West African languages such as Igbo, Ewe, Fanti and Mende. Several of the studies in this file concentrate on this particular aspect of Sea Islanders' culture, notably: 2: Jones-Jackson; 5: Nichols; 7: Jackson; 8: Smith; and 10: Johnson. Culture history is a topic well covered in this file unit. 3: Creel and 4: Carawan & Carawan, as already indicated, contain much information on this subject which is further supplemented with the data contained in 8: Smith and 11: Johnson. Other ethnographic topics given varying degrees of coverage in the file are as follows: slavery, in 3: Creel and 11: Johnson; parental disciplinary practices, in 6: Smith; techniques of methodological analysis (author's data), in 6: Smith; riddles, proverbs, toasts, rhymes, and games in 10: Johnson; and agriculture, particularly in reference to cotton growing, in 11: Johnson.

Special marking decisions for this file are as follows: segregation policies imposed by White South Carolinians on the Sea Islanders -- Category 177; ideas about race relations (by the Sea Islanders themselves) -- Categories 177 and 829; information on the NAACP -- Category 668; the Progressive Club, a consumer's cooperative -- Category 474; biographical information on Septima Clark and Esau Jenkins, founding organizers of the "citizenship schools" -- Categories 159 and 875; Moving Star Hall, as a structure -- Categories 344 and 346 (depending on context); Moving

Star Society -- Categories 794, 456, 767 (depending on context); religious "shouts" -- Categories 796, 786 (sometimes in combination with 533); Sea Island Comprehensive Health Care Corporation -- Category 741; root doctors -- Category 759; and hags, a witch and/or disembodied spirit of an old woman who practices witchcraft -- Categories 754 and 774.

The cultural summary of the Sea Islanders which appears here was written by Mary H. Moran for the Encyclopedia of World Cultures. The information presented in the source evaluation was prepared by John M. Beierle in January 1991.]